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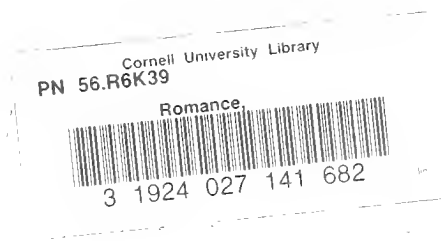
THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Leaflet No. 10

Romance

By

W. P. Ker



March, 1909

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ROMANCE¹

THE eighteenth century is generally supposed to have been anti-romantic in literature, through the revolution in taste which is described by Hurd in his *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762):

‘Henceforth, the taste of wit and poetry took a new turn, and the Muse who had wandered so long in the world of fiction was now constrained against her will—

To stoop with disenchanted wings to truth,

as Sir John Denham somewhere expresses her present enforced state, not unhappily. What we have gotten by this revolution, you will say, is a great deal of good sense. What we have lost is a world of fine fabling.’

It could not be put better than this, the difference between the two ages—Spenser and Pope. It is an historical judgement that really describes a real difference, and the judgement is all the more significant because it is uttered by a man who is living in the middle of what he describes, who belongs as an eighteenth-century literary man to a world of good sense—a world which is thus conscious of itself, and able to describe itself. What Hurd says in the lifetime of Dr. Johnson could not be improved by any one writing in a later age with all the opportunities for comparison and revision of judgement that are afforded by later revolutions in taste. Hurd is one of the chief advocates of the *Faerie Queene* in the eighteenth century; one of those who were not quite satisfied with good sense. His *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* are a protest against the restriction of poetry, a claim for freedom, a justification of the things which were popularly condemned as Gothic and fanciful. His protest throughout is delightfully written, and full of good sayings and good temper. It is not extravagant or effusive; it is all the more telling as a proof of the literary reaction against

¹ A lecture delivered to the members of the English Association at the Annual General Meeting, January 15, 1909.

common sense. Here is a very reasonable man, no anarchist or revolutionary, writing in elegant language to defend the miraculous things in Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser. 'The Fairy tales of Tasso do him more honour than what are called the more natural, that is the classical, parts of his poem. We make a shift to run over the passages he has copied from Virgil. We are all on fire amidst the magical feats of Ismen, and the enchantments of Armida.'

Hurd, of course, could not have written as he did if he had been alone in his taste. He was writing on behalf of many unknown readers, who agreed with him. There was a strong romantic tradition in the eighteenth century, though it is not the main influence and does not give its character to the literature of the time. 'The fictions of the Gothic romances are not so remote from credibility as is commonly supposed,' said Dr. Johnson; he amused himself in Skye by thinking of his long days in the saddle or at sea, as the journey of a knight errant who finds entertainment, at the end of his day, in some gracious gentle house at Raasay or Dunvegan.

Dr. Johnson was fond of old romances, and so no doubt were other people in his time, and many other people who did not share this taste had at one time shared it, had wandered like Milton in the fables of chivalry, had at any rate in the nursery, like Steele's young friend, passed from the fiction of Aesop's Fables to the history of Belianis of Greece and the Seven Champions of Christendom.¹ Wordsworth, like Dr. Johnson, had much more reading than he ever turned to use in his own works, and Wordsworth gives evidence about the vogue of old romances in his own early days. He has nothing but gratitude for them, and he cannot bear to see them

¹—a great Master of all the Learning on t'other Side Eight Years old. I perceived him a very great Historian in Aesop's Fables: But he frankly declared to me his mind, that he did not delight in that learning, because he did not believe they were true; for which reason I found that he had very much turned his studies for about a twelvemonth past into the Lives and Adventures of Don Bellianis of Greece, Guy of Warwick, the Seven Champions, and other historians of that age. . . . He would tell you the mismanagements of John Hickathrift, find fault with the passionate temper in Bevis of Southampton, and loved St. George for being the champion of England; and by this means had his thoughts insensibly moulded into the notions of discretion, virtue, and honour. I was extolling his accomplishments when the mother told me that the little girl who led me in this morning was in her way a better scholar than he: "*Betty*" (says she) "deals chiefly in Fairies and Sprights, and sometimes in a winter night will terrify the maids with her accounts till they are afraid to go up to bed." Tatler No. 95. (Steele.)

displaced by the crude new educational substitutes which are provided by modern progress and the march of intellect :—

Oh! give us once again the wishing cap
Of Fortunatus, and the invisible coat
Of Jack the Giant-Killer, Robin Hood,
And Sabra in the forest with St. George!

Now if one puts together Hurd's remark—'We have lost a world of fine fabling'—with Wordsworth's complaint against the modern educator, a rather unexpected result may appear. Hurd means that the change of taste (we may call it 'eighteenth century', though of course it began before that) expelled romance from poetry, and did harm to poetry by confining it in range and method. Wordsworth, writing early in the nineteenth century, finds that whatever may be the fortune of poetry the common prose children of England are being defrauded of their inheritance; their allowance of fairy tales is stopped. The result, when these two statements are put together, is this: that the eighteenth century, which generally did without romance in its literature, kept up the supply of romance for its children, and at least allowed the reading of romance to its grown men; while the nineteenth century, coming in with a great romantic revolution in literature, cuts off the tradition of romance among simpler unliterary people, takes away the *Seven Champions* from the schoolboy and the ballads from the country-side—at the same time that motives of romance are being sought for everywhere by literary artists for their own purposes.

Few revolutions or general changes of habit have been more important than that which cut off the old romantic popular traditions of folk-lore and ballads in the nineteenth century, and put modern educational textbooks in their place. This means a change in the minds of modern civilized human beings, making them unlike all their ancestors. They learn nothing now in the way that all generations, including those of the enlightened eighteenth century, learned their ballads and fairy stories. These things may come to them by way of books; they do not come as part of their real life, from the mouth of their nurse or grandmother; and so the child is taken away from his native earth and his home, and is turned into an abstract educational product, owing the contents of

his mind to schoolmasters. In the nineteenth century almost everywhere the old immemorial traditions of popular romance have withered up. The shepherds of Ettrick and Liddesdale know nothing of the old ballads, or know them only as any foreigner might know the *Border Minstrelsy*, out of books. The Fairy Tales that once were English are known now mostly through Grimm, where they are known at all. Every child knows the *Travelling Companion*, which was Peele's *Old Wives' Tale*, but they know it from Hans Andersen, not from their grandmothers.

The appetite for romance has always been strong, even in the most reasonable and scientific ages. The eighteenth century was fairly well supplied; it had, as Dr. Johnson proves, the old books of chivalry, it had the *Arabian Nights*, it had the *Orlando* and the *Faerie Queene*. The favourite reading of Edward Waverley in his boyhood was that of Charles James Fox through all his life. But the craving was unsatisfied; there were not enough new stories. We know more or less how the fashion changed again; how literary good sense went down in value, how Macpherson's Ossian triumphed and took captive some of the strongest minds in Europe.

Peacock has described the new fashions in the essay which provoked Shelley to his Defence of Poetry:—

‘Mr. Scott digs up the poachers and cattle-stealers of the ancient border. Lord Byron cruises for thieves and pirates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands. Mr. Southey wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, useless, and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has a commonplace book full of monstrosities, strings them into an epic. Mr. Wordsworth picks up village legends from old women and sextons; and Mr. Coleridge to the valuable information derived from similar sources superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and the mysticisms of German metaphysics, and favours the world with visions in verse in which the quadruple elements of sexton, old woman, Jeremy Taylor, and Emanuel Kant, are harmonized into a delicious poetical compound.’

In this revolution one is often amazed at the feebleness of the victors, the disproportion between the trifling interest of the *Castle of Otranto* and its immense success—or between the present value of Macpherson and the praise of Ossian in Goethe's *Werther*. Among

the strange things in history is the relation of Monk Lewis and Scott. The tales of Terror and Wonder are mostly trash :—

Not long lived the Baron and none since that time
 To inhabit the castle presume,
 For chroniclers tell that by order sublime
 There Imogene suffers the pain of her crime
 And mourns her deplorable doom.

At midnight four times in the year does her sprite,
 When mortals in slumber are bound,
 Arrayed in her bridal apparel of white
 Appear in the hall with the skeleton-knight,
 And shriek as he whirls her around.

While they drink out of skulls newly torn from the grave,
 Dancing round them pale spectres are seen ;
 Their liquor is blood, and this horrible stave
 They howl : ‘To the health of Alonzo the brave
 And his consort the False Imogene !’

This verse Coleridge says ‘has an effect not unlike that of galloping over a paved road in a German stage-waggon without springs’. But he thinks *Alonzo and Imogene* worth mentioning.

The appetite was so strong that almost anything with a touch of romance was welcome. ‘Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries. Those will last us some time.’ The evidence of Miss Austen is not to be refused.

Those who provided the ‘horrid mysteries’ were often clear enough in their own mind as to their value. Lewis parodies his own romance, and adds to his *Tales of Wonder* a satirical ballad which, to use ‘a selection from the language spoken among men’, gives the whole thing away. Smedley’s Ghost speaks (out of the *Dunciad*) :

Ah ! knew’st thou in the happier days
 How smooth the way to fame,
 That now e’en D—r—n wears the bays,
 E’en Kn—t acquires a name :

Thyself would leave the hackneyed themes
 That Pope, that Dryden tired ;
 Thyself indulge in German dreams
 By great Goethe inspired.

Loves not Invention ever young
 The Weser's golden strand?
 Has not the harp wild genius strung
 In Schiller's magic hand?
 O come with foreign fable fraught
 And weave the Runic rhyme,
 Drink as I drank the siren draught
 In Thames' congenial slime.
 Though first the nymph thou hast not led
 From Danube's parent shore,
 Still may'st thou to the tuneful dead
 Add one dull Briton more.

The truth seems to be that all romantic revivals are followed by crowds of impostors; sham romance appears to be easy; it has often been profitable. It is found in many different periods, and the explorer who goes back into the Middle Ages to get the genuine thing will too often find only the ancestors of Monk Lewis—mechanical contrivers, professional dealers of more or less ingenuity and various degrees of dullness. Oberon in *Huon of Bordeaux* is a son of Julius Caesar and Fata Morgana, and that is a type of the incongruous things to be found in the old romantic schools. A great philologist has told me how, in his youth, he was drawn to read *William and the Werewolf*; the title was promising. But the result was so disappointing that he gave up romance and took to the study of Middle English. There are similar cases of disappointment to be confessed by those whom Carlyle once led to his German romantic authors.

Where is true romance? Where is it, the *blaue Blume*? Where is the island of Bimini? It is not to be found where the professional agents of the romantic schools have 'opened up the country'. The fashionable romance of the twelfth century has little more of the true magic than Macpherson or the German work that followed him; the 'horrid mysteries' of the Elizabethan drama often fail as grievously as the emphasis of Manfred or Hernani, in comparison with what one knows for the true test of romance, the spell of the *Ancient Mariner* or some of the old ballads, *The Widow's Sons*, *The Milldams of Binnorie*—or let us say, to the due honour of the despised rationalist eighteenth century, the magic of the *Castle of Indolence*:

Full in the passage of the vale above
 A sable silent solemn forest stood,
 Where nought but shadowy forms were seen to move,
 As Idless fancied in her dreaming mood;

And up the hills on either side a wood
Of blackening pines aye waving to and fro
Sent forth a sleepy horror through the blood,
And where the valley winded out below,
The murmuring main was heard and scarcely heard to flow.

Many a reader of romance has fared badly and returned in depression like the gentleman who went in the twelfth century to look for the marvels of the forest of Broceliande.

A fool I went, a fool I came,
Folly I sought, and mine the blame.

Is the magic world anywhere to be found? One good rule in this as in other holiday explorations is to do without the organizers of traffic as far as possible. Romance is often near its best with authors who are not thinking about it, or who think other things more important; with Homer, and with Dante, who like Dr. Johnson was a reader of books of chivalry, but did not imitate them directly. The romance that springs up along with the graver intentions of Dante and Milton is often more worth than the deliberate romance of Ovid or Ariosto.

Then, quite at the other side and far away from the great poets, are the anonymous authors of ballads and tellers of folk-lore stories, and along with these I would put some authors who have the gift of bringing back the charm of a winter's tale to stories that have been sophisticated or overdressed by professional literary men. I think particularly of the old Italian writer from whom Tennyson took the *Lady of Shalott*; I think of the beautiful Welsh prose stories of *Peredur* and the *Lady of the Fountain* and *Geraint and Enid*—stories recovered from the French and restored from the verse of the fashionable French poet—admirable in its own way—to a simpler and more effective form.

It would be a great mistake to think of popular folk-lore fairy tales as containing no more than the *matter* of romance—plots and adventures that may serve an ambitious poet and be turned into a noble form of poetry in the *Odyssey*. This no doubt is one of the uses of fairy tales; to be the matter for successive poets, from Homer onwards. But they are not mere material; and one language differs from another in the fashion of its fairy tales. We know how easy it is for tradition to go wrong, to mix and deface and mangle stories. Yet often we find stories surviving unimpaired, with the unities

preserved, taking different shapes, all good and sound, in different countries—like that of the *Travelling Companion*, which is better and fresher in a West Irish traditional version, written down in the nineteenth century, than in many of the older mediaeval literary renderings. It is enough to compare Dr. Hyde's Irish stories or Campbell's *Tales of the West Highlands* with Grimm or with Dasent's *Tales from the Norse*, to see how much variety of style and what admirable form there may be in traditional stories.

I take one example which is the more remarkable because it gives an incident that comes at the beginning of *Percival* and may be compared with *Peredur* and the other versions of that story by those who are interested specially in such things.

This that I am going to quote is not from a variant of *Percival*, though it has some resemblances in detail; it is the opening of the story of *The Knight of the Red Shield* in Campbell of Islay's second volume:—

'There was before now a king of Eirinn and he went himself and his people and his warriors and his nobles and his great gentles to the hill of hunting and game. They sat on a hillock coloured green colour, where the sun would rise early and where she would set late. Said the one of swifter mouth than the rest: "Who now in the four brown quarters of the universe would have the heart to put an affront and disgrace on the King of Eirinn, and he in the midst of the people and the warriors, great gentles and nobles of his realm?"'

"Are ye not silly," said the king; "he might come, one who should put an affront and disgrace on me, and that ye could not pluck the worst hair in his beard out of it."

'It was thus it was. They saw the shadow of a shower coming from the western airt and going to the eastern airt, and the rider of a black filly coming cheerily after it.' (Here follows one of the ornamental rhetorical amplifications which are common in the Gaelic; unnecessary for the story.)

'Then he spoke to them in the understanding quieting truly wise words of real knowledge; and before there was any more talk between them he put over the fist, and he struck the king between the mouth and the nose, and he drove out three of his teeth, and he caught them in his fist, and he put them in his pouch, and he went away.

"Did not I say to you," said the king, "that one might come who should put an affront and disgrace on me, and that you could not pluck the worst hair in his beard out of it?"'

Let me quote another passage of romance from another Gaelic story, the voyage of Mael Duin. Its translator, Mr. Whitley Stokes (many thanks to him for that and many other good gifts to the

lovers of stories), has noted this as having the 'natural magic' of which Mr. Arnold spoke in his *Lectures on Celtic Literature* :—

'Thereafter they voyaged till they found a great silvern column. It had four sides, and the width of each of these sides was two oar-strokes of the boat, so that in its whole circumference there were eight oarstrokes of the boat. And not a single sod of earth was about it, but only the boundless ocean. And they saw not how its base was below nor how its summit was above. Out of its summit came a silvern net far away from it; and the boat went under sail through a mesh of that net.

'And then they heard a voice from the summit of yonder pillar, mighty, and clear, and distinct. But they knew not the tongue it spake, nor the words it uttered.'

Sometimes one is inclined to think that Romance, like Happiness, is 'there where thou art not'; if it were real, would it be romance? Is it not all vague, impalpable—less true to its own nature in the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which is a complete and reasonable thing, than in the music of *Kubla Khan*? It is strange how often it seems to spring up in the most unlikely ground, in burlesque even, like the *Castle of Indolence*, or in satire, like the *Vision of Judgement*. But perhaps one ought not to be led away like this by the magic of the artists who play with shadowy recollections, who show the landscape of romance, as in the *Castle of Indolence*, but never tell the story, who evoke the form of it, as in *Kubla Khan*, and leave the matter, a *caput mortuum*, to be thrown away. Sometimes one is inclined to take *Romance* as a name for the most subtle spirit of imagination, for the quintessence of poetry; and this may be right. But it is too difficult, for the present purpose at any rate, and there are other meanings of the word and other considerations which may be dealt with more familiarly; I come back to plainer ground.

Though it is true that the story-tellers are often disappointing, yet the poor stories, even those ridiculed in *Sir Thopas* and *Don Quixote*, have their value and an important place in history. Many of them seem only fit for puppet-shows, like that of Don Gayferos; but the puppet-shows and chap-books, the beggar minstrels and reciters, have had a great deal to do with the making of people's minds. The uses of romance—in its ruder form we need not scruple to consider what is the use of it—may be seen most beautifully in the passage of Barbour's *Bruce* where the good King Robert takes the romance of *Ferumbras* to amuse his people on the shore of Loch

Lomond, while the slow ferryboat works to and fro bringing the rest of the party across :

The king the quhilis meryly
 Red to thaim that war him by
 Romanys of worthi Ferambrace
 That worthily our-cummyn was
 Throw the rycht douchty Olywer.

The gud king upon this maner
 Comfortyt thaim that war him ner ;
 And maid thaim gamyn and solace
 Till that his folk all passyt was.

I bought a copy of the same story as a chap-book in Madrid, and think there must be something in it to have lasted so long. In Italy you may still find *I Reali di Francia* on bookstalls, alongside of the realists of France, and you may remember the old story of the man found weeping in an Italian market-place because he had just heard from a reciter the news of the death of Roland. It was from tastes and interests of that sort that the *Orlando* grew to its poetical form with Boiardo and Ariosto ; and so the old Italian audiences and the story-tellers of the market-place have their share in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, together with the family of Sir 'Thopas, as Warton has shown. In Jusserand's *English Novel in the Time of Shakespeare* we may trace the fortunes of many of the old books of chivalry ; Mr. Firth, in his introduction to the *Pilgrim's Progress*, has made out the debt of Bunyan to Sir Bevis of Southampton—one of the pleasantest of demonstrations, in a kind of science which is often horribly abused by dull people, but not on that account to be rejected.

The *Pilgrim's Progress* is one of the results of mediaeval romance ;¹ it has the sort of plan which saves even some of the dull romances from total failure, and is found in some of the best. It is the simplest thing in the world ; scarcely to be called a plot—merely a journey with adventures. Yet what more is wanted to give the romancer his opportunity ? It is one of the things that never grow old, from Theseus and Jason to Sir Percival, and so on to the *Pilgrim's Progress* and so to modern examples, which any one may think of for himself. *Rob Roy* has it. The second part of *Rob Roy*, the Highland

¹ The Scriptures, thought I, what are they ? A dead letter, a little ink and paper, of three or four shillings worth. Give me a ballad, a newsbook, George on horse-back or Bevis of Southampton, give me some book that teaches curious arts, that tells of old fables ; but for the holy Scriptures I cared not.'

adventures and Bailie Nicol Jarvie, have generally rather eclipsed the first part, but not so as to spoil the impression of Francis Osbaldistone's journey northward, with the accompaniment of 'Mr. Campbell'—surely one of the best things in the whole of Scott for suspense and gradual deepening of interest.

Here I come to perilous ground, and I ask for sympathy. I have known about it all along, and so far I have succeeded in evading that particular risk. But now I come, to use the old ambiguous phrase, 'into the danger' of Stevenson's *Essay on Romance*. The danger is twofold; first, when one thinks of what Stevenson has written, it is more difficult than ever to have ideas of one's own; but again he speaks rather slightly of the art of Scott, and ends not quite generously with a note of depreciation—a mistake, surely, in his own art. Of course Stevenson is very far from the enemies of Scott—from those who see no more in him than Peacock saw, or Mark Twain, with his philosophical proof that all the vanity of Southern chivalry—that is, of the Southern States in America—is attributable to *Ivanhoe*. And it can hardly be said that Stevenson's criticism of the one particular passage in *Guy Mannering* is unreasonable or unjustified, as far as it goes. But it gives a wrong impression, and the conclusion—Scott 'an idle child'—is a failure of critical judgement. There is every kind of interest and every variety of art in Scott. There is the machinery of the ordinary historical novel so easily imitated by G. P. R. James and many others in all the tongues of Europe, so hopelessly antiquated now. One remembers the story of Niebuhr; how when he was on his deathbed he had Fenimore Cooper recommended to him for diversion, and tried him, and then asked for Josephus instead. And there is the adventure which is of quite a different sort from the antiquarian furniture and the conventional dialogue—adventures like those of which I have spoken in *Rob Roy*—like that of Sir Dugald Dalgetty in his escape from Inverary, or Everard in *Woodstock*, when he is caught in the dark and held down with the sword-point pricking at his throat. I have cause to remember that, because it is the first thing of Scott's that I remember; the book was being read aloud, and it seemed to me that it would be worth looking into. There is the admirable plot of the *Talisman*, a story which does not bring into play any of the comic genius of the author, and so attains a different kind of success from the richer books like *Old Mortality* and the

Heart of Midlothian, *Guy Mannering*, and the *Fair Maid of Perth*, where there are interests woven into romance—interests of character and conversation—which are not, properly speaking, romantic at all—the humours of Dandie Dinmont and Cuddie Headrigg.

Quite unlike the diffuse historical manner of much of *Waverley* and *Kenilworth* and *Quentin Durward*, there is the form, or rather many forms, of short story: *Wandering Willie's Tale* in *Redgauntlet*—*The Highland Widow*—*The Two Drovers*: these last bringing in a tragic element of mistake and misunderstanding with more effect than any of the longer novels. And in verse there is the same enormous variety—between the plain straightforward narrative of the *Lady of the Lake* and the lyrical mystery of *County Guy* and some other of the shorter pieces. All which goes to prove what needs no particular proof, that Romance means almost everything—from the two horsemen riding together at the beginning of the historical novel, or from the pasteboard Moors of the puppet-show, to the spell of the enchanted ground, the music of dreams and shadows.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

The following passage from the *Citizen of the World* gives a glimpse of a romantic school not now very clearly remembered:—

‘I was going to expose his mistakes when it was insisted that I had nothing of the true Eastern manner in my delivery. “This gentleman’s conversation,” said one of the ladies who was a great reader, “is like our own—mere chit-chat and common sense; there is nothing like sense in the true Eastern style, where nothing more is required but sublimity. Oh! for a history of Aboulfaouris the grand voyager, of genii, magicians, rocks, bags of bullets, giants and enchanters, where all is great, obscure, magnificent, and unintelligible.” “I have written many a sheet of Eastern tale myself,” interrupts the author, “and I defy the severest critic to say but that I have stuck close to the true manner. I have compared a lady’s chin to the snow upon the mountains of Banek; a soldier’s sword to the clouds that obscure the face of heaven. If riches are mentioned, I compare them to the flocks that graze the verdant Teflis; if poverty, to the mists that veil the brow of Mount Baku. I have used *thee* and *thou* upon all occasions; I have described fallen stars and splitting mountains, not forgetting the little houris who make a pretty figure in every description. But you shall hear how I generally begin: ‘Eben-benbolo who was the son of Ban, was horn on the foggy summits of Benderabassi. His beard was whiter than the feathers which veil the breast of the penguin; his eyes were like the eyes of doves when washed by the dews of the morning; his hair, which hung like the willow weeping over the glossy stream, was so beautiful that it seemed to reflect its own brightness, and his feet were as the feet of a wild deer which fleeth to the tops of the mountains.’ There, there is the true Eastern taste for you; every advance made towards sense is only a deviation from sound. Eastern tales should always be sonorous, lofty, musical, and unmeaning.”’ Goldsmith, *Citizen of the World*, Letter XXXIII.

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